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Unknown years of Jesus

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The **unknown years of Jesus** (also called his **silent years**, **lost years**, or **missing years**) generally refers to the period of Jesus's life between his childhood and the beginning of his ministry, a period not described in the New Testament.[1][2]

The "lost years of Jesus" concept is usually encountered in esoteric literature (where it at times also refers to his possible post-crucifixion activities) but is not commonly used in scholarly literature since it is assumed that Jesus was probably working as a tektōn (usually translated as carpenter, but could also mean builder) in Galilee, at least some of the time with Joseph, from the age of 12 to 29.[2][3][4]

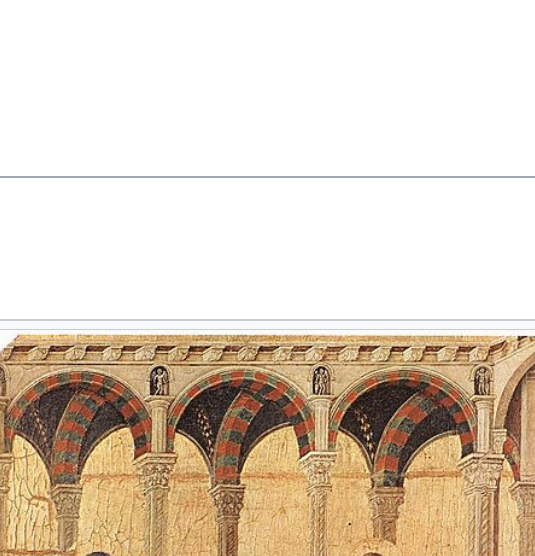
In the 19th and 20th centuries, theories began to emerge that, between the ages of 12 and 29, Jesus had visited India and Nepal, or had studied with the Essenes in the Judaean Desert.[4][5] Modern mainstream Christian scholarship has generally rejected these theories and holds that nothing is known about this time period in the life of Jesus.[4][6][7][8]

The use of the "lost years" in the "swoon hypothesis" suggests that Jesus survived his crucifixion and continued his life instead of what was stated in the New Testament that he ascended into Heaven with two angels.[9] This, and the related view that he avoided crucifixion altogether, has given rise to several speculations about what happened to him in the supposed remaining years of his life, but these are not accepted by mainstream scholars either.[9][10][11]

The 18 unknown years [edit]

New Testament gap [edit]

Following the accounts of Jesus' young life, there is a gap of about 18 years in his story in the New Testament.[4][6][12]


12 year old Jesus talking with the learned sages of the Temple. Duccio, early 14th century.

The Finding in the Temple is described in chapter 2 of the Gospel of Luke. It is the only event of the later childhood of Jesus mentioned in a canonical gospel.[13] This describes Jesus, at the age of 12, slipping away from his parents while on a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They found him discussing with the teachers at the Temple in Jerusalem, who were all amazed at the depth of his understanding of religious and philosophical matters. Luke says that after that Jesus returned with his parents to Nazareth and "advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men", but other than that nothing is written in the gospels of Jesus' next 18 years.[4]

Christian tradition suggests that Jesus simply lived in Galilee during that period.[14] Modern scholarship holds that there is little historical information to determine what happened during those years.[4]

The ages of 12 and 29, the approximate ages at either end of the unknown years, have some significance in Judaism of the Second Temple period: 13 is the age of the bar mitzvah, the age of secular maturity;[2] and 30 the age of readiness for the priesthood, although Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi.[15]

Christians have generally taken the statement in Mark 6:3 referring to Jesus as "Is not this the carpenter...?" (Greek: οὐχ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τέκτων, romanized: *ouch outos estin ho tektōn*) as an indication that before the age of 30 Jesus had been working as a carpenter.[16] The tone of the passage leading to the question "Is not this the carpenter?" suggests familiarity with Jesus in the area, reinforcing that he had been generally seen as a carpenter in the gospel account before the start of his ministry.[16] Matthew 13:55 poses the question as "Is not this the carpenter's son?" suggesting that the profession tektōn had been a family business and Jesus was engaged in it before starting his preaching and ministry in the gospel accounts.[17][18]

Background of Galilee and Judea [edit]

See also: Cultural and historical background of Jesus

The historical record of the large number of workmen employed in the rebuilding of Sepphoris has led Batey (1984) and others to suggest that when Jesus was in his teens and twenties carpenters would have found more employment at Sepphoris rather than at the small town of Nazareth.[19]

Aside from secular employment, some attempts have been made to reconstruct the theological and rabbinical circumstances of the "unknown years". For example, soon after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls novelist Edmund Wilson (1955) suggested that Jesus may have studied with the Essenes,[20] followed by the Unitarian Charles F. Potter (1958) and others.[21] Other writers have taken the view that the predominance of Pharisees in Judea during that period, and Jesus' own later recorded interaction with the Pharisees, makes a Pharisee background more likely, as in the recorded case of another Galilean, Josephus, who studied with all three groups: Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes.[22]

Other sources [edit]

See also: Infancy gospels and Pseudepigrapha

The New Testament apocrypha and early Christian pseudepigrapha preserve various pious legends filling the "gaps" in Christ's youth. Charlesworth (2008) explains this as due to the canonical Gospels having left "a narrative vacuum" that many have attempted to fill.[23]

Jesus' childhood is described in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, and the Syriac Infancy Gospel, among other sources.[24]

Claims of young Jesus in Britain [edit]

During the late 12th century, Joseph of Arimathea became connected with Arthurian legend, appearing in them as the first keeper of the Holy Grail.[25] This idea first appears in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* [fr], in which Joseph receives the Grail from an apparition of Jesus and sends it with his followers to Britain. This theme is elaborated upon in Boron's sequels and in subsequent Arthurian works penned by others.[25]

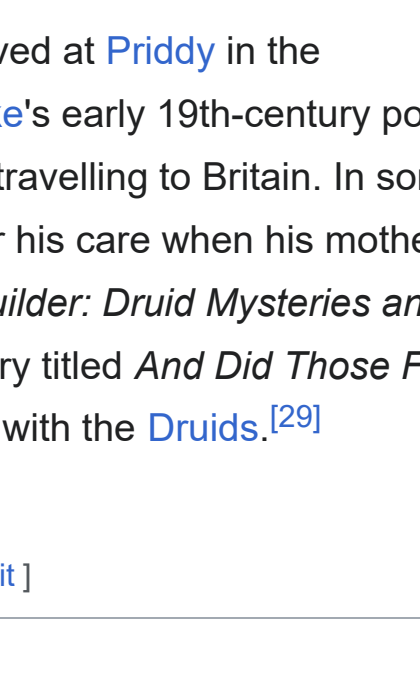
This article **has been flagged as possibly containing fringe theories without giving appropriate weight to mainstream views**. Please help improve the article or discuss the issue on the talk page. *(June 2025)* *(Learn how and when to remove this message)*

Some Arthurian legends hold that Jesus travelled to Britain as a boy, lived at Priddy in the Mendips, and built the first wattle cabin at Glastonbury.[26] William Blake's early 19th-century poem "And did those feet in ancient time" was inspired by the story of Jesus travelling to Britain. In some versions, Joseph was supposedly a tin merchant and took Jesus under his care when his mother Mary was widowed.[27][28] Gordon Strachan wrote *Jesus the Master Builder: Druid Mysteries and the Dawn of Christianity* (1998), which was the basis of the documentary titled *And Did Those Feet* (2009). Strachan believed Jesus may have travelled to Britain to study with the Druids.[29]

Claims of young Jesus in India and/or Tibet [edit]

Nicolas Notovitch, 1887 [edit]

Main article: Nicolas Notovitch


Nicolas Notovitch

In 1887, Russian war correspondent Nicolas Notovitch claimed that while at the Hemis Monastery in Ladakh, he had learned of a document called the "*Life of Saint Issa, Best of the Sons of Men*" – *Isa* being the Arabic name of Jesus in Islam.[30][31][32] Notovitch's story, with a translated text of the "Life of Saint Issa", was published in French in 1894 as *La vie inconnue de Jesus Christ* (Unknown Life of Jesus Christ).[5][32]

According to the scrolls, Jesus abandoned Jerusalem at the age of 13 and set out towards India, "intending to improve and perfect himself in the divine understanding and to studying the laws of the great Buddha". He crossed Punjab and reached Puri Jagannath where he studied the Vedas under Brahmin priests. He spent six years in Puri and Rajgir, near Nalanda, the ancient seat of Buddhist learning. Then he went to the Himalayas, and spent time in Tibetan monasteries, studying Buddhism,[30] and through Persia, returned to Jerusalem at the age of 29.

Notovitch's writings were immediately controversial and Max Müller stated that either the monks at the monastery had deceived Notovitch (or played a joke on him), or he had fabricated the evidence.[30][33][34] Müller then wrote to the monastery at Hemis and the head lama replied that there had been no Western visitor at the monastery in the past fifteen years and there were no documents related to Notovitch's story.[35] J. Archibald Douglas then visited Hemis monastery and interviewed the head lama who stated that Notovitch had never been there.[35] Indologist Leopold von Schroeder called Notovitch's story a "big fat lie".[36] Wilhelm Schneemelcher states that Notovitch's accounts were soon exposed as fabrications, and that to date no one has even had a glimpse at the manuscripts Notovitch claims to have had.[5]

Notovich responded to claims to defend himself.[37] However, once his story had been re-examined by historians – some even questioning his existence – it is claimed that Notovitch confessed to having fabricated the evidence.[36] Bart D. Ehrman states that "Today there is not a single recognized scholar on the planet who has any doubts about the matter. The entire story was invented by Notovitch, who earned a good deal of money and a substantial amount of notoriety for his hoax".[38] However, others deny that Notovich ever accepted the accusations against him – that his account was a forgery, etc. Although he was not impressed with his story, Sir Francis Younghusband recalls meeting Nicolas Notovitch near Skardu, not long before Notovitch had visited Hemis monastery.[39]

In 1922, Swami Abhedananda, the president of the Vedanta Society of New York between 1897 and 1921 and the author of several books, went to the Himalayas on foot and reached Tibet, where he studied Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan Buddhism. He went to the Hemis Monastery, and allegedly found the manuscript translated by Notovitch, which was a Tibetan translation of the original scrolls written in Pali. The lama said that it was a copy and that the original was in a monastery at Marbour near Lhasa. After Abhedananda's death in 1939, one of his disciples inquired about the documents at the Hemis monastery, but was told that they had disappeared.[40][41]

Levi H. Dowling, 1908 [edit]

Main article: The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ

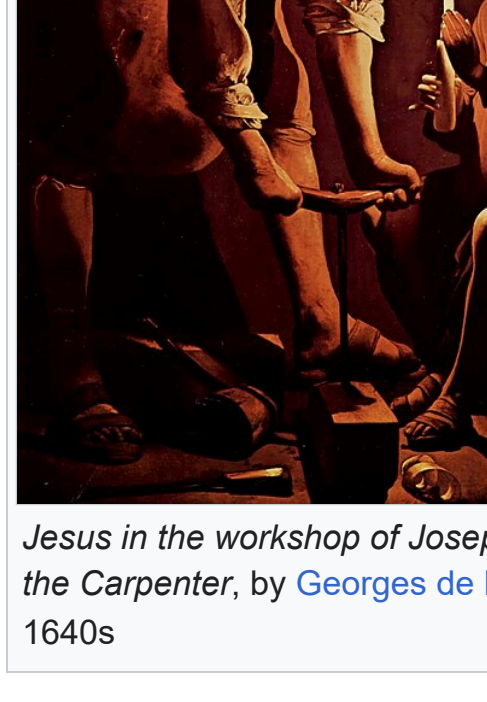
In 1908, Levi H. Dowling published the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* which he claimed was channeled to him from the "Akashic records" as the true story of the life of Jesus, including the 'lost' eighteen years silent in the New Testament." The narrative follows the young Jesus across India, Tibet, Persia, Assyria, Greece and Egypt.[42] Dowling's work was later used by Holger Kersten who combined it with elements derived from other sources such as the Ahmadiyya beliefs.[10]

Nicholas Roerich, 1925 [edit]

Main article: Nicholas Roerich

In 1925, Nicholas Roerich recorded his travels through Ladakh in India. This portion of his journal was published in 1933 as part of *Altai Himalaya*. He recounts legends of Issa shared with him by the Ladakhi people and lamas, including that Issa (Jesus) traveled from Judea to India with merchants and taught the people. An extended section of this text parallels sections of Notovitch's book, and Roerich comments on the remarkable similarity of the accounts of the Ladakhis to these passages, despite the Ladakhis having no knowledge of Notovitch's book. He also recounts that the stories of others on his travel refer to various manuscripts and legends regarding Jesus (Issa) and that he personally visited the "abbot" of Hemis.[43]

Rejection by modern mainstream New Testament scholarship [edit]


Jesus in the workshop of Joseph the Carpenter, by Georges de La Tour, 1640s

Modern mainstream Christian scholarship has generally rejected any travels by Jesus to India, Tibet or surrounding areas as without historical basis:

- Robert Van Voorst states that modern scholarship has "almost unanimously agreed" that claims of the travels of Jesus to Tibet, Kashmir or rest of India contain "nothing of value".[7]
- Marcus Borg states that the suggestions that an adult Jesus traveled to Egypt or India and came into contact with Buddhism are "without historical foundation".[8]
- John Dominic Crossan states that none of the theories presented about the travels of Jesus to fill the gap between his early life and the start of his ministry have been supported by modern scholarship.[6]
- Leslie Houlden states that although modern parallels between the teachings of Jesus and Buddha have been drawn, these comparisons emerged after missionary contacts in the 19th century and there is no historically reliable evidence of contacts between Buddhism and Jesus.[44]
- Paula Fredriksen states that no serious scholarly work places Jesus outside the backdrop of 1st century Judaism.[45]

Other claims [edit]

Japan [edit]

Some people in Japan have believed that Jesus visited them during the lost years and possibly survived the crucifixion to remain in Japan for the rest of his life. The legend exists in a village named Shingō, Aomori, and the supposed tomb Kirisuto no Haka.[46]

Artistic and literary renditions [edit]

The boy Jesus represented as the Good Shepherd; image above the North door of the Church of the Good Shepherd (Rosemont, Pennsylvania)

In 1996, the documentary *Mysteries of the Bible* presented an overview of the theories related to the travels of Jesus to India and interviewed a number of scholars on the subject.[47]

Edward T. Martin's book *King of Travelers: Jesus' Lost Years in India* (2008) was used as the basis for Paul Davids' film *Jesus in India* (2008) shown on the Sundance Channel. The book and film cover Martin's search for Notovitch's claimed "Life of Issa".[48]

The book *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, by Christopher Moore, is a fictional comedy which tells the story of Jesus's adolescence and his travels to India and China from the point of view of Jesus's best friend Biff.[49]

See also [edit]

- Basilideans
- Gospel of Barnabas
- Gospel of Basilides
- Gospel of James
- Life of Jesus in the New Testament
- The Life and Teachings of Jesus in *The Urantia Book*

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2. ^ a b c James H. Charlesworth *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* 2008 ISBN 0687021677 "From twelve to thirty then are "Jesus' silent years," which does not denote he was silent. It means the Evangelists remain silent about what Jesus did." ... "Only Luke reports that Jesus was in the Temple when he was twelve, apparently for his bar mitzvah (2:42), and that he began his public ministry when he was "about thirty years of age" (3:23). What did Jesus do from age twelve to thirty?".
3. ^ E.g., see *Lost Years of Jesus Revealed* by Charles F. Potter ISBN 0449130398
4. ^ a b c d e f *All the People in the Bible* by Richard R. Losch (May 1, 2008) Eerdmans Press ISBN 0802824544 209: "Nothing is known of the life of Jesus during the seventeen years from the time of the incident in the temple until his baptism by John the Baptist when he was about thirty. Countless theories have been proposed, among them that he studied in Alexandria in the Jewish centers there and that he lived among the Essenes in the Judean desert...there is no evidence to substantiate any of these claims and we have to accept that we simply don't know.... The most likely thing is that he continued to live in Nazareth and ply his trade there..."
5. ^ a b c *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1: Gospels and Related Writings* by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. Mcl. Wilson (Dec 1, 1990) ISBN 066422721X page 84 "a particular book by Nicolas Notovitch (Di Lucke im Leben Jesus 1894) [...] shortly after the publication of the book, the reports of travel experiences were already unmasked as lies. The fantasies about Jesus in India were also soon recognized as invention... down to today, nobody has had a glimpse of the manuscripts with the alleged narratives about Jesus"
6. ^ a b c Crossan, John Dominic; Richard G. Watts (1999). *Who is Jesus? : answers to your questions about the historical Jesus*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 28–29. ISBN 0664258425.
7. ^ a b Voorst, Robert E. Van (2000). *Jesus Outside the New Testament : an introduction to the ancient evidence*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans. p. 17. ISBN 0-8028-4368-9. "Jesus' putative travels to India and Tibet, his grave in Srinagar, Kashmir, and so forth. Scholarship has almost unanimously agreed that these references to Jesus are so late and tendentious as to contain virtually nothing of value for understanding the Historical Jesus."
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10. ^ a b *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1: Gospels and Related Writings* by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. Mcl. Wilson (Dec 1, 1990) ISBN 066422721X page 84. Schneemelcher states that Kersten's work is based on "fantasy, untruth and ignorance (above all in the linguistic area)" Schneemelcher states that ""Kersten for example attempted to work up Notovitch and Ahmadiyya legends with many other alleged witnesses into a complete picture. Thus Levi's *Aquarian Gospel* is pressed into service, along with the Turin shroud and the Qumran texts."
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13. ^ "Fifth Joyful Mystery: The finding of Jesus in the temple", Vatican.va
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15. ^ :Reiner, Edwin W. (1971). *The Atonement*. Nashville: Southern Pub. Association. ISBN 0812700511. OCLC 134392. Page 140 ""And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph." Luke 3:23. But Christ, of course, did not belong to the Levitical priesthood. He had descended neither from Aaron nor from the tribe of Levi."
16. ^ a b *The Gospel According to Mark: Meaning and Message* by George Martin (Sep 2005) ISBN 0829419705 Loyola Univ Press pages 128-129
17. ^ *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina Series, Vol 1) by Daniel J. Harrington, Donald P. Senior (Sep 1, 1991) ISBN 0814658032 Liturgical Press page 211
18. ^ *The Gospel of Matthew* by R.T. France (Jul 27, 2007) ISBN 080282501X page 549
19. ^ W. D. Davies, Dale Allison, Jr. *Matthew 8-18* 2004 ISBN 0567083659 T&T Clarke Page 456 "For the suggestion that Jesus worked not only in a wood-worker's shop in Nazareth but perhaps also in Sepphoris, helping to construct Herod's capital, see R. A. Batey, 'Is not this the Carpenter?', NTS 30 (1984), pp. 249-58. Batey also calls ..."
20. ^ Menahem Mansoor *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A College Textbook and a Study Guide* Brill Publishers; 1964, Page 156 "Edmund Wilson suggests that the unknown years in the life of Jesus (ages 12-29) might have been spent with the sect, but there is no reference to this in the texts."
21. ^ Charles F. Potter *The Lost Years of Jesus Revealed* Random House 1958 "For centuries Christian students of the Bible have wondered where Jesus was and what he did during the so-called "eighteen silent years" between the ages of twelve and thirty. The amazing and dramatic scrolls of the great Essene library found in cave after cave near the Dead Sea have given us the answer at last. That during those "lost years" Jesus was a student at the Essene school is becoming increasingly apparent. .."
22. ^ Brennan Hill *Jesus, the Christ: contemporary perspectives* 1991 ISBN 1585953032 Page 6 "than about the people with whom Jesus lived. Josephus (d. 100 C.E.) was born just after the time of Jesus. He claims to have studied with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes as a young man"
23. ^ James H. Charlesworth *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* 2008 ISBN 0687021677 The New Testament apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha preserve many legends concocted to explain Jesus' youth. Tales have him ... The Evangelists have left "a narrative vacuum," and many have attempted to fill it. Only Luke reports that Jesus ...
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26. ^ *Camelot and the vision of Albion* by Geoffrey Ashe 1971 ISBN 0434034010 Page 157 "Blake may be referring to one of the odder offshoots of the Arthur-Grail imbroglio, the belief that Jesus visited Britain as a boy, lived at Priddy in the Mendips, and built the first wattle cabin at Glastonbury. This tale seems to have arisen quite ..."
27. ^ *Milton, A Poem (The Illuminated Books of William Blake, Volume 5)* by William Blake, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi (Sep 4, 1998) ISBN 0691001480 Princeton Univ Press Page 214 "The notion that Jesus visited Britain may have been reinforced for Blake by the name 'Lambeth' (house of the lamb - see 4:14-15 note). Compare Isaiah 52.7 ('How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that ..."
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33. ^ Simon J. Joseph, "Jesus in India?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Volume 80, Issue 1 pp. 161-199 "Max Müller suggested that either the Hemis monks had deceived Notovitch or that Notovitch himself was the author of these passages"
34. ^ *Last Essays* by Friedrich M. Mueller 1901 (republished in Jun 1973) ISBN 0404114393 page 181: "it is pleasanter to believe that Buddhist monks can at times be wags, than that M. Notovitch is a rogue."
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